



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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WHOOING CRANE POPULATION MAY DECLINE SLIGHTLY;
U.S.-CANADIAN TEAM TRACKS BIRDS DURING MIGRATION

Four whooping crane chicks were raised in wild and captive flocks in 1981, a year which may see a slight population decline despite intensive research to propagate the endangered species.

The highlight of this year's research is a first-time effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service to radio track the main flock on their 2,600-mile fall migration from Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park to the Texas Gulf Coast. On October 12, trackers reported one of the chicks hit a power line in north Saskatchewan and died several days later of apparent spinal injuries.

While researchers expressed regret over the loss of the young crane, they emphasized that had the flock not been tracked, the fate of the bird probably would have remained a mystery. Service scientists stress that the more they learn about mortalities, the better prepared they are to prevent them. Previous collisions with power lines have been documented in the Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge flock. Power companies in problem areas have cooperated with researchers to solve the problem, sometimes by attaching brightly colored markers to the lines.

The Wood Buffalo flock produced three chicks this year during an exceptionally dry nesting season that saw increased egg losses to predatory animals. In August, brush fires swept through the forests and marshes, eventually destroying some 70 percent of the cranes' nesting habitat. However, the chicks escaped the ravaged area with their parents and the rest of the flock.

All three chicks in the Wood Buffalo flock were captured and fitted with radio transmitters by U.S.-Canadian researchers several weeks before fire ignited the habitat. Trackers followed the first two chicks to leave Wood Buffalo; the first was being tracked by a team of U.S. and Canadian Government biologists in a Canadian airplane when it hit the power line. In Southern Saskatchewan an American plane carrying a Canadian biologist--the only tracker to follow the entire route--was standing by to pick up the trail, with a ground research team also following the flock. The same tracking procedures now are being used to track the second chick, last reported to be near Texas. Earlier, trackers found that the tagged chick had covered 470 miles in one day at altitudes of up to 9,000 feet, leaving Montana, overflying North and South Dakota, and landing in Nebraska.

As the international team began monitoring the main flock, other researchers recaptured a captive-reared female whooper set free last spring at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho. The female had been transported to Idaho from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Washington, D.C., as a possible mate for a lone male, raised by sandhill crane surrogate parents. However, scientists felt the two whoopers did not establish a strong enough bond to guarantee that the male would lead the female on the 870-mile migration route to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico.

The Grays Lake foster flock was started in 1975 to establish a second wild flock of whooping cranes, to build the birds' population and to eventually ensure separate migratory flocks. This would diminish the chance of a natural disaster eradicating the species in the wild. The sandhill cranes in Idaho hatch "spare" eggs taken from nests at Wood Buffalo and from a captive breeding flock at Patuxent. A recent shortage of suitable female whoopers prompted scientists to introduce the female raised at Patuxent into the foster flock. Since the recaptured Patuxent female made a good adjustment to the wild, researchers will repeat the experiment next year.

Despite the two surviving chicks raised at Wood Buffalo Park and one raised in captivity at Patuxent, scientists say the whooping crane population has not increased, as several mortalities are known. A complete count will be conducted when migration ends in December, and will probably show a slight decline. However, the bird that has become a symbol of all endangered species has been making a gradual comeback: in 1980, whoopers numbered nearly 100 in the wild and 24 in captivity, in contrast to a dismal low of 15 in 1941, when many considered the cranes' extinction to be inevitable.

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